

# Now you see it, now you don't: The shifting realities of cabinet government

*Cabinet government can appear an unwieldy and inefficient framework for making political decisions, yet the model not only survives, but is thriving across much of the globe. Drawing on a new book, **Patrick Weller, Dennis C. Grube and R.A.W. Rhodes** explain the resilience of this much criticised tradition of collective decision-making.*

You have to love a cabinet reshuffle. The excitement is palpable. The rumour-mill goes into overdrive. Ministers flock to and from Downing street. The famous Number 10 door opens to reveal both the smiling faces and the forlorn as they are discharged onto the pavement. The winners and losers are confronted by the flash of press bulbs in every direction.

The prize that each of them covets – the dream that has them waiting by their phones – is to gain or retain a place at the big table of British Government. What they desire is a seat in one of the mahogany chairs that denote political status for those chosen to briefly occupy them.

For years now, scholars and commentators alike have reflected that cabinet government is not what it used to be. As a decision-making body, it is criticised for being too slow, too unwieldy and too leaky to match the demands of modern government. Some lay the blame at the feet of over-mighty prime ministers, whilst others suggest the quality of people around the table is in decline.

Yet cabinet government not only survives, but it also thrives across much of the globe. For all the discontent, few parliamentary democracies seem to be seriously considering alternatives to cabinet government. What then is the secret to the resilience of this much criticised tradition of collective decision-making?

In a [new book](#), we argue that cabinet government survives because it offers a unique mechanism for solving a set of political dilemmas that are an embedded reality of government decision-making. Whether in majoritarian Westminster system democracies like the UK and Australia, or in the consociational systems of European countries like Denmark, The Netherlands and Switzerland, the dilemmas are the same. What emerged from hours of interviews in each of the five countries listed above – with ministers, officials, and advisers – is that government cannot function without some sense of collective purpose. The forms and functions of cabinet government are what provide that central imperative.

The dilemmas are complex. Somehow governments must develop rules and practices that allow for certainty and consistency in decision making. They must be able to balance good politics with good policy and be able to maintain cohesion both inside and between political parties. Cabinet government provides the vehicle to do all those things, whilst forcing prime ministers to persuade rather than simply command and offering some collective support for the taking of difficult political decisions.

What is the secret to a cabinet system of decision-making that is working well? In many ways it's an open secret. Cabinet government offers a flexibility and resilience that more brittle, heavily 'institutionalised' systems struggle to match. That doesn't mean everything important happens around one table. Far from it. In Denmark, the formal cabinet meeting operates essentially as a closing ceremony for events that have taken place elsewhere in the two key committees that decide the multi-party priorities of coalition governments. In Switzerland, the cabinet (called the 'Federal Council') has only seven members, each of whom can be president as the position rotates between the seven on an annual basis. The business of cabinet is negotiated item by item. It is a system in which there is no real first among equals – just equals hammering out one compromise after another.

Cabinet government allows for multiple styles of leadership within the same set of traditions. In the UK, if a prime minister is of a mind to be dominant but insular, they can keep cabinet at arms-length. If they wish to run a collegial model, they can take a more collective approach. Both are possible without any need to change the system. But that doesn't mean that cabinet can be ignored. No prime minister, however powerful, can simply take the support of their colleagues for granted. They must persuade as well as give orders; listen as well as demand.

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Power is performed and negotiated through the traditions and practices of cabinet government. There is a shared web of beliefs and practices on what should or should not be done. These beliefs and practices will differ from one system to another and their interpretation will depend on immediate local contingencies. For example, in most systems, there is a publicly stated convention that ministers should resign if their department presides over a serious policy error. They almost never do. Private failings – misuse of funds, sex scandals, and dodgy deals – these are the things that bring ministers down. But the belief matters because it guides behaviour, even if the lines of when and what the consequences should be are never clear, and often rely on the willingness of the prime minister to keep the minister on.

The working myth which draws the strands together is the notion of collective responsibility. The notion holds not because of some idealistic belief that a cabinet operates like King Arthur and the knights of the round table, linked by pure nobility of purpose. It is driven instead by the needs of practical politics masquerading as principle. Governments need the solidarity that cabinet provides, and the protection it offers by collectivising blame.

It doesn't mean the system works perfectly. Recent history shows only too clearly that individual cabinets can become dysfunctional. But cabinet government itself is a survivor. It isn't going anywhere anytime soon.

**For more information, see the authors' accompanying book, [Comparing Cabinets: Dilemmas of Collective Government](#) (Oxford University Press, 2021)**

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*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [Andrew Parsons / No 10 Downing Street \(CC BY-NC-ND 2.0\)](#)*

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